



Handbook

A Toolkit For Local
Elected Climate Action



Key Resource

Aligning Local Community Climate Action WITH UNDRIP

Climate Caucus

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Introduction

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (“UNDRIP”) is a fundamental framework for the protection of inherent Indigenous rights in the face of colonization at multiple levels of government. Indigenous peoples globally have rallied behind UNDRIP and called for its adoption by state governments, in Canada this includes federal and provincial governments primarily. UNDRIP contains 46 Articles affirming inherent Indigenous rights and calls on state governments to legislate or domesticate the Declaration to ensure compliance.

Local or municipal governments are a child of provincial governments in Canada, and derive their authority and jurisdiction accordingly. Local governments are uniquely positioned to advance UNDRIP, being in closer relationship and proximity to First Nations territorial owners, as well as urban Indigenous populations, and in some cases can move more nimbly or quickly to advance UNDRIP-related efforts than their provincial and federal counterparts. Contrastingly, local governments are also uniquely challenged in advancing UNDRIP due to lack of overarching jurisdictional powers, lack of resources targeting UNDRIP compliance, and varying degrees of political (voter) support for Indigenous rights generally.

Indigenous rights and climate action are intimately intertwined. Local governments seeking to take enact climate change mitigation or prevention measures, can benefit from millennia of local Indigenous knowledge, and work in allyship with Indigenous governments to strengthen efforts for the betterment of their respective communities. Pursuing climate action without Indigenous involvement not only deprives local governments of Indigenous knowledge, but threatens the possibility of partnerships and relationship-building. Similarly, where local governments lack knowledge of First Nation climate actions within their own territories or communities, they run the risk of operating in isolation, duplicating efforts, or at worst undermining First Nation climate actions.

Context: Legal Duties and Obligations of Local Governments to Indigenous Peoples

Municipal governments make a myriad of decisions each day that have the potential to impact Indigenous rights, lands and waters. Yet, the legal landscape on the duties of local governments in terms of consultation, accommodation, and now consent, is far from clear.

Key cases on development in communities such as Salmon Arm, found that while development in non-Indigenous communities may impact Indigenous rights, lands and waters, that municipal governments “lack the ability to provide sufficient remedies to achieve meaningful consultation and accommodation.”

In BC, the position of the courts has been [echoed by the provincial government](#), that local government’s ‘do not have the provincial government’s constitutional obligation to consult with First Nations.’ Yet, many of the interviewees for this project engage routinely in ‘referrals’ that take up a large amount of time and human capacity for both First Nation and local governments.

In other provinces like Ontario, similar provincial [court cases](#) have allowed municipal governments to escape the duty to consult, by simply not addressing that question in one of its rulings, making an assumption that such a duty existed, without ever declaring it.

While the legal context and constitutional duties owed or not owed to Indigenous peoples by local governments is important context, it is not the driving force behind the case studies outlined in this handbook. Rather, the focus of these case studies are those local governments who are taking action on UNDRIP, in the *absence* of any form of legal duty to do so. This is in contrast to the provincial and federal governments who have too often only advanced Indigenous rights in the face of decades of litigation requiring them to do so.

Context: BC First Province to Adopt UNDRIP

The government of BC was the first colonial government (federal or provincial) in Canada to adopt and implement UNDRIP. In 2019, following a period of engagement with the First Nations Leadership Council, the provincial government passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (“DRIPA”). This act committed the provincial government to a process to ensure that all provincial laws are consistent with UNDRIP, and an accompanying action plan process that is guided by input from First Nations in BC.

While municipal governments are a creature or child of the provincial government, DRIPA in BC is silent on the role of municipal governments in upholding UNDRIP. The provincial Local Government Act, and others similar in other provinces, grant powers, duties and functions to local governments including municipalities and regional districts.

Presumably, however, the Local Government Act is subject to DRIPA and at some point, must be reviewed to ensure consistency with UNDRIP. The current 2022-2027 DRIPA Action Plan makes no mention of reforms to the Local Government Act nor any other actions to ensure local governments are acting to uphold UNDRIP, and [provincial communications](#) to the Union of BC Municipalities states that there are “no immediate effects on local government legislation, and provincial laws will be brought into alignment over time.”

Interestingly, several of the local government case studies outlined here preceded the provincial and federal governments in their adoption of UNDRIP. It is these early adopters and action takers that are of significance for broad learning, not only for their leadership but for the longer-term learnings having been active UNDRIP implementers for multiple years.

Key Resources

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. 2007.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. 2019.

Local Government Act. 2015, 2024.

City of Courtney Resolution, adopting UNDRIP for Indigenous reconciliation.

[City of Toronto Report for Action 2016](#), adopting UNDRIP as part of the City's year-long proclamation on Truth and Reconciliation 2013-2014.

[City of Surrey Council Report](#) on endorsing UNDRIP as reconciliation framework. 2017.

[City of Edmonton Indigenous Framework](#), Commitment #1 supporting UNDRIP as a foundation for the Indigenous Framework.

Manual on the Declaration by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. A manual for Human Rights Institutions. 2013.

UNDRIP & You Webinar. Hosted by the Real Estate Foundation of BC and Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions. 2023.

[Optimism for Renaming Dewdney Avenue after Saskatoon drops ‘John A. McDonald Road’](#). News article, 2021.

ᑭᐱᙳᓄᗴᘎᗴᗴᗴ / ᐱᙳᓄᗴᘎᗴᗴᗴ / Jericho Lands to become future complete community. City of Vancouver, 2024.

[Local Governments, Indigenous Reconciliation and the Declaration Act](#). Provincial government presentation slides to UBCM. 2022.

Learning From Early Adopters & Action Takers: UNDRIP & Local Government Case Studies

APPROACH & METHODS FOR CASE STUDIES

Climate Caucus in partnership with Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions (Tara Marsden/Naxginkw) took the following steps to conduct and share learnings from local government case studies that are doing work to advance UNDRIP:

1. Retained Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions, who brings extensive experience in applying and advancing UNDRIP at multiple levels.
2. Collaborative research on potential case studies, conducting internet-based searches and inquiring amongst networks of First Nations and local governments.
3. Outreach to invite elected officials and senior staff from local governments to participate in 30–60 minute virtual recorded interviews.
4. Transcription of interviews and coding for themes.
5. Synthesis and summary of key approaches to advancing UNDRIP outlined in the section below.

Listening to numerous Indigenous leaders and community members who have called for non-Indigenous people to do their fair share of the work of decolonization, the focus for the interviews was non-Indigenous elected officials and senior staff (with the exception of one Indigenous elected official). This approach also is grounded in the theory of change that other local governments not well advanced in their UNDRIP work will learn better from people who are similar to them, and have taken strides where they have yet to.

The author has taken a story telling approach, with use of excerpted quotes, in as close to original version as possible from the interviews. Edits are solely for readability, and connecting related concepts, or inserting hyperlinks for readers to learn more. Quotes are mixed and woven throughout from all of the interviews. Interviewees are listed in the Appendix, but are not individually attributed for each quote.

Case Study Findings

Key Approach: Tackling Racism in Cities & Towns

During COVID a [high-profile incident](#) occurred that really unleashed an undercurrent of racism. I met with the Chief [from First Nation], and we decided to create a joint press release and media campaign (posting on socials, interviews) – calling on the community to stand together, reminding us that we are better than this. The response from community was overwhelming- they organized a convoy, in the best sense of the word! People made t-shirts, flags, signs and bumper stickers (all city vehicles took part too) that said, “I Stand with Cowichan”. Hundreds of people drove through the community, going up and down streets past houses and apartments, waving, honking, sharing uplifting messages of love and respect with Indigenous neighbors, friends and relatives, letting them know they were standing by them and standing up to racism and discrimination. Indigenous and Non Indigenous community members were standing on their porches and lawns, many in tears, and hundreds of messages posted about what that meant to people”.

Another [incident that received international attention](#), of two boys who were best friends, one was Cowichan and one wasn't. They got into a fight and soon, bystanders started to jump in and beat on the young Cowichan man. It turned in to a international story about racism [video recording went viral online]. The Chief of Cowichan Tribes reached out and discussed what we could do to bring peace... Elders were called in and set up a ceremony at the school all the boys involved attended together. The Elders stood them up with their mothers, talked to them about taking responsibility for their actions and then, one by one, called on the boys to do better, reminding them that ‘we need to help change the world. How what they did, could define them for the rest of your life if you let it, if we all let it. The Elders said, we don't want this act to define you, we want what you do next to define you’. The feedback from follow up interviews with the boys and their families spoke to the transformation they underwent, the deep impact that experience had on each one.

“That resistance underneath [to advancing UNDRIP] will always be there until we deal with it. It just gets suppressed, people are polite, until we reach a point of tension until something happens that tips the scales once again, it becomes exposed. We must continue to stand together as a community, this is not the time to give into the fear of something being taken away on this journey [by recognizing Indigenous rights].”

We invested our time in truth, before reconciliation. We took a deep dive into our history, of displacement and ongoing systemic racism against the peoples whose land we are on. Truth telling is essential, it shows that we are committed to work through what some feel can be embarrassing to the city, or as it is often called ‘too depressing’ to hear about because it doesn’t feel good for us to talk or learn the truth... We always want to jump to the actions of reconciliation and call it done, but it will be done, not in our lifetimes.

“The circumstances in the city of Williams Lake in regards to Indigenous relations had gotten to such a disastrous and disrespectful and [racist point](#) from our local government to our local First Nations that it really lit a fire under me to start paying attention to local government.”

“Local governments need a keener understanding of environmental racism, in relation to their climate action. Environmental hazards are disproportionately impacting Indigenous communities and peoples all across Canada. At the same time, there is no one like Indigenous peoples who have traditional knowledge systems that can assist with climate action and have seen the step-by-step incremental changes in climate from pre-colonial times up until now.”

Key Approach: What’s in a Name?

“If you go back to the history of the City of Mission, the name literally comes from the fact that we were identified as a place for a Catholic mission. The idea of colonialism is very much present in our past. So, we have a real responsibility from our municipality’s perspective in being leaders in a new mission of reconciliation. It isn’t just philosophical. It really represents opportunity for all of the various communities here. But from a philosophical perspective, we want to have a second chapter of the story, and one that talks about being leaders in reconciliation.”

“[New Westminster is known as the Royal City, “birthplace of colonization”] and so the Community Stories of Truth and Reconciliation was a risky thing. There are a lot of monarchists here, a lot of feelings of pride about our colonial history. But it felt like it was necessary because it was the thing that we were not having a conversation about so we wanted to try and daylight it.”

“We have a new aquatic centre opening up next year. We had a process with the nations to give a name to it. We brought in a knowledge keeper who was able to lead us through the process. We ended up on a *hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓* name, *təməsew̓tx* which means Otter House which I think is an incredible name.”

“Around the same time that the City of Vancouver approved the motion I brought forward on implementing UNDRIP and started to work to set up the task force, we also had a motion and vote at council to change the name of a “Trutch Street” on the West side of Vancouver and Musqueam territory, which was a moving and impactful decision on a very specific issue. The [renaming of Trutch Street](#) was a tangible example of reconciliation, but we want to be at the table together and change how we're making all of our decisions. That's the real strength of the UNDRIP work, and that's what I'm interested in, systems change, and so I have found it meaningful to be part of. We are now having a whole review of our commemoration policy and how we do namings across the city, who is involved, alongside our public art policy.”

Key Approach: Dismantling Colonial Infrastructure, Re-Indigenizing Cities & Towns

“The city hall used to be the office of Indian Affairs and has a room where they used to prepare children to go to residential school. We have been working with a group of Elders for 17 years, and no one mentioned the history of the building (and she was there for 2 terms already). We invited Elders to the inauguration and they told her what had happened there - she asked what they wanted her to do and they put together what needed to be done.”

“We did a street sign project with Elders and asked what they would like to see, which resulted in instead putting up a reconciliation mural.”

“There are concerns that people are not prepared for change. There are plans for a city park to be returned to the nation, and I am worried that people will be reacting instead of planning on how to do this well.”

“The Judge Matthew Begbie statue, we didn’t have a public event we just removed it quietly. But it still made national news because it was around the same time as the Sir John A McDonald statue in Victoria was taken down. We had a long-standing relationship with the Tsilhqot’in because of the connection to the hanging of their Chiefs and Judge Begbie. So [taking down the statue] was about an apology for them. Begbie had their Chiefs hanged because they pushed for their land, and the leaders today have asked for the statue in New West to be taken down.

People said we didn’t consult, and were upset. But we didn’t consult because the nation had already told us what they wanted and so we removed it. It then got put in the museum in an exhibit called Reconciling, to create conversation with the community. People say taking down a historical statue is erasing history, but we want to contextualize the statue. It just shouldn’t be in a place of power, it should be in a learning environment where we can talk about the impasse.”

“We had a statue in one of our parks of John A. McDonald. It’s down now. The idea was to put it somewhere there could actually be information explaining the entire history. It became quite controversial. There was also a discussion around potentially renaming one of our streets, it’s a major street going through Regina called [Dewdney](#). Reconciliation Regina is expected to review renaming options and then give us advice on that.”

“Sometimes small things make a big difference. We replaced some street signs in town with bilingual signs, and realized that half the street names in town are nouns [e.g. Orca Crescent] and could be easily translated. The process was really gratifying. We were able to use some of the resort municipality initiative funding to pay for the new signs. It helps tourists learn, but we started with the signs near the schools to support their language learning. So the kids walking to school every day are going past those bilingual signs. That’s what it’s all about.”

“We had an affordable housing project with a 40% Indigenous tenancy target. We worked with an Indigenous artist to carve two welcome poles for the entrance. The

funding for the housing project took too long, and the poles were ready first. So we pivoted and let the artist decide where to erect them, they chose Peace Park. We had a [beautiful ceremony](#) that was a huge cultural experience for everyone. Any opportunity to Indigenize anything I think is really important, because it brings people that awareness – ‘hey this isn’t our land’.”

Key Approach: Growing from Catalyzing Events

“The foundation for the UNDRIP Strategy was both the [Olympics](#) and the Canada 150 efforts. The City and the nations did a lot of important reconciliation work like education and partnership building that laid the groundwork to talk about Indigenous rights before doing the UNDRIP work.”

“There was growing awareness and need for action around when the Maa-Nuulth treaty was being finalized. How to connect the treaty with the district’s official community plan. We had no budget to update an outdated plan. The Mayor had personal relationships with some of the Elders and elected officials of the nation, which helped with inviting their input.”

Key Approach: Building Relationships

“We have an Elders committee looking at what they want to do in Duncan, in terms of building within the city to work on reconciliation (does not want to use words like reconciliation because Elders don’t like to use that term). It’s not about building acknowledgement, it’s about making it part of who we all are.”

“Relationships that they have been building for years, that is where the value is – if you don’t have this and the understanding, the rest of it will be very hard to do; there isn’t a simple answer, because we are talking about system change.”

“A relationship doesn’t occur by sitting down and having an agenda and going through the agenda and getting to the answers you want. It is about opening up and sharing your stories, finding out what commonalities there are for the communities, ,relationship building; and that takes time. It’s not easy. You have to keep working on it, it is really about shifting the culture within the organization; both at the staff and the political level. That is one of the biggest challenges that we’ve tackled head on.”

“Before UNDRIP at the provincial level there was mass confusion. Even within a district about what meaningful consultation is, especially where the nation doesn’t have the capacity they need to engage meaningfully. We have shifted to a table that both parties see a benefit of coming to, instead of somebody just waiting for the city to phone them and ask their opinion.”

“Right now we're very blessed to have some people who are really eager to work together. And if somebody sets it down and, the balance changes that way. It's not invincible. It needs to have continuing energy put into it. And we've seen examples of communities that have tables, but not very much is happening at the tables. So for us, the work we're doing. Is both a reminder of why we should work together, but also the work itself matters and so we have to keep doing that.”

“The deeper work of building relationships is not expensive. Our Indigenous Relations Coordinator brought in Soup and Bannock on Wednesdays. We invite an Elder to join, he brings Bannock his niece makes, and then someone from the city brings the soup. People on their lunch just come in and chat, with no meeting task list or agenda. This has been deeply transformative for the city. The most transformative work is actually the cheapest.”

“The nation really helped us reframe our position in a good way. We had to stop going to them when we needed something, especially consultation on our projects. We had to focus more on the relationship, which is slow and personal work that requires commitment.”

“We often hear from people within the municipality who are saying ‘you should do this or you should do that’ – one of the most important learnings that we’ve tried to share is true reconciliation is about listening and hearing direction from First Nations leadership and communities, not going to them and saying ‘we propose this or that.’ That really is, in its own way, just another form of paternalism.”

Key Approach: Being Bold, Breaking New Trail

“I think our community is actually always been sort of proud to be a little bit ahead of the curve. We are a small community and not everybody knows about us, but we're willing to sort of be bold and punch above our weight. Same thing with local First Nations – not at all hesitant about thinking about being bold, their economic development strategies, their environmental services, they're leading too. And so that was a really easy place where we saw that we had alignment. You know they do punch above their weight for the size of their service.”

“Our community had its 125th anniversary of our incorporation last year. We really didn't want to celebrate it in the regular way – it felt very colonial.. We contracted the event to a community organization who we knew was aligned with our reconciliation goals and we [decolonized the whole thing](#). We didn't talk about incorporation. We didn't talk about [Robert Dunsmuir](#), who basically built the town and screwed everybody that was here before and after for all eternity. That strategic kind of goal came from the community as well. We felt really strongly that the council was aligned with the community.”

Key Approach: Strategic Level Plans

“The Hatzic Watershed Stewardship Team is playing a huge role.. We are being told that the model, the governance model, and the work is ahead of other regions in terms of dealing with flood management. I think the next story you hear is how this partnership has resulted in actual physical changes in infrastructure and operations within the floodplain in a way that is better for people, and for the environment entirely.”

“In the old (pre-2000) official community plan, we had 2 pages of history of the community focussed on settlers, and then one sentence on Indigenous history. There were even mistakes about reserves being outside of the municipality, but some were actually within municipal areas. So we engaged a group of Elders from the nation's heritage society, and they wrote with us the two pages dedicated to their history in the area. It still doesn't do justice to their history, but at least it is acknowledged.”

“The provincial legislation and the calls to action of the TRC are largely focussed on the provincial and federal governments. There are only a few places that touch on municipal

governments. We are not the Crown, we are not the state, but we have a role to play here. So we endorsed UNDRIP as the framework for reconciliation in the official community plan [Policy 1.1]...there is something powerful about having it be policy number one in the plan. It was a conscious decision to acknowledge at the outset recognition of the traditional territory. What does this mean? It is the work of now and the future, rethinking what we have done, and what we can do better.”

“Planning can be about seeing basically the ecology that underlies a place, then what is culturally known about how people relate to that place. That’s where we have had a couple of different lenses and world views that we are trying to reconcile, and one is currently the dominant pattern. The dominant world view doesn’t work well for people on personal levels, health, mental health, even economically how sustainable is it?”

“Getting [UNDRIP] into the strategic plan was a priority, because that is how work flows. If its not in the strategic plan, it doesn’t go into the work plan and it doesn’t get done. It is needed in the plan to allocate resources accordingly, and signal to the organization as a whole that it’s a priority for us.”

Key Approach: Land Back

“It took eleven years to complete the [land back](#) deal, and we believe we have set a tone for others to follow. The first time you do something, it will take time, be patient. We will learn something new each time we work together.”,

“We looked at the land back as an investment in the future [not a loss to the City]. We yield a bigger return in the future, and that is not always financial. It can be in terms of quality of life, or climate resilience for example.”

Key Approach: Support for Indigenous Guardians’ Monitoring Initiatives

“[Support for the Forest Guardians involvement in the Stave West project has evolved to] a partnership with the nations and the school board. Our board of education is working with Kwantlen and Katzie First Nations to actually deliver training in a tripartite arrangement.”

We worked with our campground operator to generate a fee to give to our Guardians on an annual basis to support their work. This was much appreciated by the nation.

Key Approach: Human Capacity, Training, Decolonizing Practices

“I think for people who care about reconciliation and decolonization, it is a complicated thing to be an elected member in colonial government on unceded territory. And so, I feel like it is deeply tied to my values and necessary for me to be able to be in this position to push for this to go ahead because you know all of us have a relationship to colonialism globally.”

“We brought in Brad Marsden to do a workshop on the legacy of residential schools as a part of our commitment to learning. More of this is needed for city councillors, from observing local government officials at the annual Union of BC Municipalities.”

“I also run a campaign school, and when I talk to potential candidates about reconciliation I advise to bring it down to the every-day level, the public spaces people go to, how they get there. Talking about reconciliation is like talking about climate change. People are too busy, they don’t want to think in broad concepts. But if you talk about tangible things about more trees on certain streets for shade, or benches for people who are walking in the heat, those are every-day things. If we talk about climate and reconciliation in a big sense, we lose people.”

“The City of Vancouver is able to fund positions in each of the nations to liaise and coordinate with the city and the Nations on UNDRIP work. This is likely be hard for some other municipalities. The City has also hired a staff person to support Urban Indigenous engagement [not the three nations whose territory the City is in]. The Task Force is driven by the 3 nations, but Vancouver has high Indigenous population who also want to be involved, but do not have an elected or representative body that speak for them.”

“One of our biggest victories was [establishing a staff position](#) to work on Indigenous relations and climate action. For smaller municipalities, having a dedicated staff position is rare with limited budget available. So when we have a Strategic Plan that includes UNDRIP as a key pillar, we have at least one staff person who is responsible and has dedicated time to work on this.”

“If a city creates an action plan on UNDRIP or Indigenous relations, then the band or nation also needs the capacity to implement with them. If you the city is lacking capacity to implement, you have created a situation where your lack of capacity is also now magnifying another government’s lack of capacity, and you are again putting the work back onto the First Nations. This cycle of relationship building is very difficult for everyone.”

“The cultural competency and anti-racism training for district staff has largely been embraced, and generally positive. But as an organization, I’d say we have a lot to learn still. Our challenge is we are a small town, and small organization, but it’s booming here right now so we are always playing catch up.”

“As a newly elected Mayor, I have learned to make friends with the engineering department. Because they are the ones on the ground. In order for the [UNDRIP] work to be meaningful, it has to impact every level of local government.”

“We found challenges throughout our organization. There is such a range of people, some who are super committed to this work and those who have no idea and get very defensive. We had to recognize this was our own organizational journey, and then making time for that. To find the right training for everyone, to do the training in a good way, not judging people as you go along, or making people feel forced.”

Key Approach: Procurement, Business & Economic Reconciliation

“In 2020 we made a major policy change, the Indigenous Procurement Policy. Which focusses on economic reconciliation, and targets at least 20% of contracts and services from the city going to Indigenous businesses. Indigenous leaders came to council and explained that by supporting Indigenous businesses, you are also supporting local businesses and putting profits back into the community.”

“In our procurement work, there are all these complexities even around international trade deals in terms of what we can prioritize for procurement. Often local government procurement tends to favor big bidders because the contracts are so big. In our social procurement work, we are working to break up those bids so that they are more

accessible for local and Indigenous companies. It is really valuable having staff from the nations involved in the process, so our staff have an understanding of how we are supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs, architects, or figuring out community benefit agreements on specific projects.”

Key Approach: Supporting More Indigenous People as Elected Officials & Local Government Staff

“Right now there are no Indigenous staff in the 300 staff members for the City of Williams Lake, and we currently have about 23% Indigenous population within the City. So if we were to be proportionate to that population, we should have around 60 Indigenous staff. There are no other Indigenous councillors, besides me.”

“As a part of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which is an advocacy organization for all municipalities in Canada, I have been going through the process of creating an Indigenous caucus. The goal is to provide elected Indigenous delegates in local government with a voice, and to strive towards Indigenous representation in every local government in Canada.”

“I have some Indigenous mentors in local government. The [Mayor of Chetwynd](#) is one of them, a big inspiration for me and one of my personal heroes. Being the only Indigenous person in City Hall is challenging, but it has also shown me the power of just having someone in the room. I started attending council meetings a year before I started my campaign [for office], and the way council would speak about local First Nations was very “us vs. them”, not very collaborative and a lot of disrespect. Now with me in the room as a councillor, conversations change, the culture changes. It provides me a lot of hope that if we can have more representation across the country, it will change so much.”

“As the only Indigenous councillor, I did a lot of my own research into strategic planning for municipalities and Indigenous relations. I produced a report and recommendations for council, that normally isn’t done, usually staff are responsible for reports. But this is another example of Indigenous people being forced to do the work for reconciliation. I was ready to go to war for this and debate for hours to defend it. I handed it out, and everyone read it and just said “this is great, let’s do it. You did all homework and its looks wonderful.”



Aligning Local Government Climate Action with UNDRIP Handbook

“Representation of Indigenous people in local government is important, but we also need to elect people who want to do the work, and who aren’t afraid. Who prioritize UNDRIP and reconciliation and TRC. People who are true allies, we need to amplify them and put them on pedestals if we have to. Those who aren’t afraid of the hard work or afraid of repercussion.”

“I am mostly held accountable by other Indigenous people, and based on their feedback I will know if I am on the right path or not. As soon as I am straying, I get told I need to right my ship.”

Key Approach: Working with Multiple First Nations & Organizations, Overlapping Territories, Urban Indigenous Populations

“Overlap can cause friction, and hinder healthy conversation. There is the nation whose territory we are on, then the surrounding area nations who come to the city for services, it’s a hub for a much larger Indigenous population, then those Indigenous people who live within the city. There isn’t an answer for how to make this easier for municipalities.”

“A lot of our [Indigenous] peoples are moving outside of their own territories. But these people don’t have an elected voice, so how do you on a governance level engage on UNDRIP with that population? It’s a really difficult scenario, where a lot of people feel left out.”

“We have worked both with the Hereditary and band leadership. But we have to do it in a way that doesn’t cause more friction or strife in their community. Understanding the culture is a primary place to begin for me. After talking to trusted people from the nation, we decided to approach the band and Hereditary leaders at the same time [not one before another].”

“We have projects that we want to partner on. But we don’t have clear partners. But that doesn’t mean you just rush it and put anyone’s name on the partnership, that’s not right too. Provincial and federal governments have a list of First Nations with interests in the area, and one list has 33 nations listed. Recognizing that colonial understandings of land use impact the way that we understand these things [overlapping territories]. I think it’s

really hard to not be that colonizer again who goes in and makes the relationships for the nations worse... These things are deeply complicated, and are rooted in colonialism. It's hard as a municipality to not sort of dig in and make that worse."

Key Approach: Accountability & Tracking UNDRIP Progress

"Our council just voted to track progress on TRC and UNDRIP. It's an important instance to show accountability by showing the public what we are doing and what we have done. If that sheet stays stagnant, it's very clear that we're not doing anything, or we aren't doing enough, or we're not doing it quickly enough. We learned from the City of Vancouver, but it's not just a cut and paste, because we are so different and so are the nations involved. We hope to be a blueprint for smaller communities."

"I have had to question assumptions, who is the community we are serving and accountable to in planning efforts? There is more than one public out there. There's this assumed default that it is the ratepayer, the taxpayer is the public we serve. That is very narrow, and in recent year we are seeing more of a focus that includes equity and marginalized voices. What used to be considered fringe is very common."

Key Approach: Paradigm Shifts & Indigenizing Local Government Perspectives

"We've been successful with developing services that serve everybody but bring a First Nations or Indigenous lens and Indigenous values, that has really resonated with our community. Our community cares about intergenerational learning. Our community cares about living well with the environment. Our community cares about restorative justice and so many other things that we have learned from First Nations partners. It's the culture and the attitude of the city and recognition of our past and how we can move forward in a better way."

"I think if we're doing climate actions and initiatives properly, it should be improving people's lives. We need to bridge this disconnect between people thinking that the climate is some separate entity. It's hard when we spend all of our time in this artificial world. So we have to try and figure out how can we understand, get people to understand no this this isn't something separate from me."



“Unfortunately, there are still too many in local government who ask ‘what’s in it for us? Why don’t bands work together so that we don’t have to do this for them all?’ These are the same views that started residential schools, the 60s scoop. These are the same views that created the Indian Act. These views exist today, but now they aren’t allowed to get those same outcomes [e.g residential schools]. Now the outcomes are to ensure that TRC and UNDRIP are the absolute maximum we can do. But in reality, these are the floors, not the ceilings.”

“I guess it's part of a long process of unlearning and questioning my role and what it is that we do, you know in government...I think that it's one of probably the areas that's been most challenging, challenging assumptions and challenging roles and past understandings or beliefs. But also it's an area that is I think probably some of the most rewarding work I've done that I sort of look and go, ‘OK I'm proud of that thing we did’, you know, being able to have a hand in some change.”

“I’ve learned the importance of listening. As a white guy, that’s particularly important. Personally, realizing that I come from a point of privilege. I am in a senior government position, I am an educated white male. All of those things start to stack up, so my voice carries very loudly. Listening is ensuring others have the space to speak. One incredible learning from listening to Indigenous leaders, was learning about planning on the life cycle of a cedar tree. Not on the standard 5-10 year municipal planning cycles. And that it is not about land use, but land relationship.”

“There's a lot to be learned from Indigenous communities who had balance for thousands of years before what we've imposed over the last couple hundred years. So we're at a point in time when our climate is telling us we don't have it right. We need to rethink things.”

Learning & Takeaways from Local Government in Advancing UNDRIP

“Engaging in reconciliation and decolonization work, I think the reflection is that we are going to make many missteps and things are going to feel bad, you know in the middle and then hopefully though it is just part of a journey that is like part of processing. But I think it is both slow and also confusing in that I think people want there to be a clear path of these things. And there isn't a clear path because nobody's ever really done this before because this is our first time, anybody's first time trying to create these, these partnerships at a local government level. I think some people are wanting to get out of this discomfort quicker. I think some people just want a land acknowledgement – the land acknowledgement is not the outcome. The land acknowledgement is just a side effect of knowing whose territory we're on and to know whose territory we're on...is about rebuilding relationships and understanding the historical connection to this territory.”

“I really want to emphasize the truth before reconciliation piece. I think that is essential for governments. We didn't pop up like mushrooms in 2022 when we were elected. We come off a basis of displacement and land theft. City councillors come with very disparate understandings of the world, sometimes based on our generation, based on what we are taught in schools. Someone asked how city councillors can learn about the truth of colonization while doing all their other work. It's a great question. They don't, unless they seek it out.”

“Creating an UNDRIP Task Force isn't always sexy, and doesn't make headlines like renaming Trutch Street did. There are built-in incentives for elected leaders to do easier and more visible work that often overshadows the harder, more systemic work.”

“A lot of smaller communities are scared that if they don't have the resources (e.g. staff, capacity funds) that it won't be good enough. It becomes the CAO or planner's responsibility for maybe one day a week. The repercussion is that feedback from the First Nation will be poor, from intentionally poor relationship building. This can lead to 5

out of 7 of your council being replaced. People are now seeing that there are real life major repercussions of doing this poorly.”

“A big learning is having patience to let the work unfold, and not on our timeline. When you have grants from the province or the federal government where we need consultation, we have boldly said ‘we’re not going to push to meet your grant deadline because we’re working in partnership and they don’t have time to review this right now. They need more time’. Stepping back from whatever white supremacist perspective of like, the province gave us this money and we have this deadline.”

Gaps & Supports Needed

“There is limited amount of information and involvement that local governments have had with this process – this process has mostly been dealt with at the provincial level. Municipalities have not had guidance on what that will look like at an operational and functional level on the ground.”

“There is a concern about political turnover. I might not have this role [after election] when everything is being implemented, and worried someone might hold the position and this might not be their priority.”

“The City and the nation do not have the capacity to do all of these other things, for example the referrals alone take up so much capacity. Would love to be able to resource the nation to do this work, but is that their current priority?”

“Being conscious of the long-term nature of this work, and how it gets bridged between elections and turn-overs in elected officials. Important to have different voices, parties and ideologies involved at each step [regardless of who is in power] to ensure accountability and continuity to the UNDRIP strategy.”

“Adding more work on a small municipality is always difficult, so a lot of resistance is based on budget constraints. Last year, the average budget for municipalities was raised by only around 5-10%. A lot more can be done if the budget is there to support it.”

“There needs to be some sort of assistance for municipalities and regional districts and First Nations to work together. The [community-to-community](#) grants are very short

term, small amount of resources available and don't actually get you to a stage where you can create and implement a plan with equal resources for both governments."

"We are not the province, and not the federal government. But we are a creature of the provincial government. There definitely are some calls from local governments to have provincial support for engagement, general referral funding. There are local government projects that also intersect with provincial authorizations, like archaeological assessments and the archaeology branch."

Interviewees

City of Vancouver, Councillor Christine Boyle

City of Duncan, Mayor Michelle Staples

City of Mission, Mayor Paul Horn and Barclay Pitkethly

City of New Westminster, Councillor Nadine Nakagawa

City of Regina, Councillor Shanon Zachidniak

City of Williams Lake, Councillor Michael Moses

District of Ucluelet, Director of Community Planning Bruce Greig

Village of Cumberland, Mayor Vickey Brown

About the Author

Tara Marsden/Naxginkw owns and operates Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions, an Indigenous Gitksan consulting business working on a variety of matters related to land, governance, Indigenous rights, research, and policy development and analysis. Tara has a Masters of Arts in Political Science from the University of Northern BC, and been taught by the many Gitksan Hereditary Chiefs and Matriarchs. For the past two decades +, Tara has worked for First Nations, the provincial government, NGOs, philanthropic organizations, and universities. In an effort to advance more sustainable development, Tara seeks to operationalize *Free, Prior and Informed Consent* for Indigenous peoples, alongside other key principles outlined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Tara lives in the Gitksan homelands of her people, in New Hazelton, BC.